

# An unusual hunter in the Stone Age rock art of lake Kanozero.

## Abstract

*This article revolves around a scene found in the Stone Age rock art of lake Kanozero on the Kola Peninsula, Russia. Three human figures are pictured in close interaction; a pregnant woman, a person next to her with a long fluid line emerging from between the legs holding a spear, and a third person directing an elk headed staff towards them. A row of footprints leading up to the spearcarrier is a significant part of the scene. There is no doubt that the persons are connected and involved in something, but what is going on? In this article, previous understandings of the composition as picturing a man and woman as a married couple are questioned. An alternative interpretation is presented, based on the symbolic bond and antagonism between male big game hunting and female reproductive powers found among hunting communities, and of the inversion of these powers in the liminal world of ritual. The role of metaphorical expression, ethics and practices for grasping and communicating long term accumulated ecological and social knowledge in traditional knowledge systems is discussed along with the need for addressing gender issues and human-animal relations in hunters rock art as intertwined.*

## Introduction

Some rock art inevitably attracts attention, triggers imagination and generates scholarly attempts of interpretation. This article takes its departure from such a scene found in the Stone Age rock art of lake Kanozero on the Kola Peninsula. The main composition consists of three, or more accurate four human figures: a pregnant woman and the baby in her belly, a person right next to her with a long wavy line emerging from between the legs and holding a spear, and a third person directing a large staff or axe towards them, most likely an elkheaded staff. In contrast to the others, the staff-carrier is pictured in profile. A row of footprints is leading right up to the spear-bearer. Beside this group there is an unidentified figure and, to the left but not painted red in the photograph, a small boat and a couple of dots and lines (fig.1).

The rock art of Kanozero consists of ca 1600 figures situated on three small islands and one rock on the eastern shore of lake

Kanozero in the southwestern part of the Kola Peninsula (Kolpakov & Shumkin 2012; Likachev 2021) (fig.2). The area is flat and swampy with numerous lakes, creeks and rivers and covered by boreal coniferous forest. The geological conditions of the lake during the Stone Age are unclear and shoreline dating is not available. However, by comparison to the rock art by the White Sea, a plausible dating of ca 3700 BC has been suggested for the first carvings at Kanozero (Gjerde 2010:346). Of the identified figures the most common motives are the large mammals (elk, whale, reindeer and bear), anthropomorphs and boats. There are also tracks and footprints of bear and/or humans and of reindeer (Kolpakov & Shumkin 2012). The scene in focus makes up the smallest of seven groups of carvings found on naturally separated bedrocks on the island of Kamennyi (fig.3). The island is small (ca 330x130m) and is characterized by a distinguished rock divided in two halves by a deep fissure. Interestingly, no carvings



Fig 1. The scene painted red. Rock art museum petroglyphs of Kanozero. Photographer unknown  
Museum-reserve "Petroglyphs of Kanozero" - Visit Murmansk



Fig. 2. Map with  
rock art sites  
mentioned in  
the text. Map  
by author.



Fig.3. The island of Kamennyi from South West. Photograph in Kolpakov & Shumkin 2012:23

are found here but a few meters below this rock, the largest concentration of figures at Kanozero have been made (ca 600), and unlike on most other panels, often overlapping. The scene in question, however, is isolated on a small rock surface close to the water's edge with no overlapping figures.

### The "married couple" in previous research

The well-defined and detailed composition has attracted quite some scholarly attention. Eugene Kolpakov and Vladimir Shumkin have suggested that the three human figures depict a "love triangle" where two men equipped with bear-spear and elkheaded axe are fighting, presumably over the pregnant woman (2012:318). The authors admit that the long wavy line of

the man holding the spear is not typically like a penis, but more reminiscent of a tail. However, at Kanozero there are six other, mutually different anthropomorph figures pictured on face with lines between their legs. Two of them have markings which could depict testicles, and from this the authors conclude that despite somewhat odd, the most probable interpretation is a penis (aa:294, 318) (fig. 4). Antti Lahelma (2019) addresses the Kanozero couple in a paper where he explores motives in North Fennoscandian rock art that are connecting humans, elk and elk-headed staffs in settings of a sexual nature, explicit or implicit as in pregnancy. Elkheaded and/or deer-headed staffs are depicted on all the larger rock art sites of Northern Fennoscandia, and they are found in archaeological contexts from the Mesolithic to early metal age

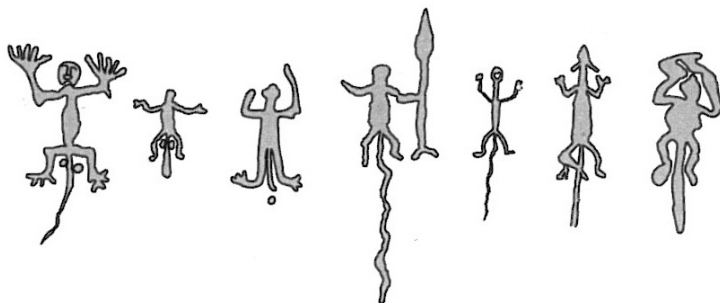


Fig. 4 Other humanlike figures pictured on face with lines between their legs at Kanozero. Illustration in Kolpakov & Shumkin 2012:294

over a large area in northwestern Eurasia (Kashina and Zhulnikov 2011; Mantere 2023 for overview). In burial contexts they belong to mature and elderly individuals, often men (Kashina and Zhulnikov 2011, Mantere and Kashina 2020:15 with references). In rock art, the staffs occur in different situations, mostly in the hands of a person and they have been understood as personal objects linked to the lives of their owners and loaded with power, that of the elk and that of the owner (Mantere 2023:210). According to Ingrid Fuglestad these objects are mediating and controlling instruments between the animal and human worlds where the borders between the ritualized hunting and purely ritual activities are blurred (Fuglestad 2018:119). It should be noted that many of the animalheaded staffs pictured in rock art are stylized and not obviously deer- or elklike, this is true for the few staffs at Kanozero as well. Still, in comparison with the more naturalistically depicted staffs and considering the larger contexts of archaeological findings of the area, I find this interpretation of the object depicted most likely (see Mantere 2023 chapter 6 for overview of animal headed staffs in the rock art of northern Europe).

Lahelma too is in doubt whether the wavy line of the spearbearer is an exaggerated penis or something completely different but concludes that this person is the male part of a couple (2019:232). He compares the Kanozero couple to another pair in Nämforsen, northern Sweden which also is closely overlooked by an elkhead. One of the humans at Nämforsen has a very round belly, the other lacks sexual connotations but still, they are understood to be a man and a woman. Ville Mantere, in a recent doctoral thesis about human – elk relations in northern Europe in a long-term perspective, uses the scene at Kanozero to illustrate how the elk cow was associated with human fertility and reproduction (2023:198f, 246). Unlike Kolpakov and Shumkin, Mantere does not see a confrontation between the presumable men in the scene but like Lahelma, stresses the role of the elk-being which is active in the agency of the staff, and ulti-

mately has the power over the couple and their offspring (Mantere 2023:246, see also Kashina and Zhulnikov 2010:43 and Lahelma and Herva 2020:80 for similar opinion). To conclude; the scene with the two, or three persons including the baby, under the consecration of the staff does indeed point to a close relation between human reproduction, elk and these staffs as objects with agency, however not necessarily in a way that have been suggested for the “couple” of Kanozero.

Overall, sexed human figures are rare in northern Fennoscandian rock art (Fuglestad 2018:357 for overview), and as Lahelma has pointed out: the few instances where biological sex is shown are therefore significant and relevant in the particular contexts where they are depicted (2019:232). However, the assumption of male sex for the nonpregnant figure of the two is based not so much on the strange “penis” as on the spear as an exclusive male attribute used for hunting large prey, which I will argue it is<sup>1</sup>. It is also based on preconceptions of what makes up a meaningful human relation, and that the figures pictured next to each other are two individuals, which I will argue they are not. Where two humans are pictured side by side and one of them can be identified as either male or female, the other is easily assumed to be of the opposite sex. Sex then, is not made explicit – it is understood. Sometimes this could very well be the case but in this scene much care has been taken in visualizing detail such as certain features of the mother: the vulva, the baby heads down in birthing position and another unidentified detail in her chest - possibly the heart. It seems obvious that the line emerging from between the legs of the spear-bearer is long and wavy for a reason and that this is important. In this context, a more plausible interpretation than a penis (or a tail) is that it makes explicit fluidity and the flow of menstrual blood.

## The power of female blood

In hunting communities in northern North America and Siberia, and among reindeer herders that also hunted, blood was (and is) a powerful and depending on context, dangerous substance which must not be handled carelessly. Menstrual blood and blood from childbirth was particularly potent, especially in the symbolic and ritual dichotomy between women and the male spheres of hunting. For example, a woman stepping over the legs of a hunter, or worse over his weapons was considered a severe fault, and remains of respected animals were placed in high position not to be accidentally stepped over by a woman, especially if menstruating or pregnant. (Nelson 1983:141; Brightman 1993:127; 1996:706; Popov 1984:52; Eidlitz Kuoljok 1999:90; Lot- Falck 1953:128ff; Andersson 2010:114f). Similar ideas can be found among hunting groups in Africa (Lewis-Williams 1981; Power and Watts 1997; Morris 2000). Avoiding contact between women and the hunter's equipment was necessary not to venture hunting luck but also to avoid sickness and other misfortunes. Less appreciated is the explanation of not causing harm to women and the children they might have (Brightman 1993:125; Eidlitz Kuoljok 1999:89; Simčenko 1976:239ff, 250). Importantly, it is not every woman that are said to be antagonist to certain animals and to men's hunting success, but above all women of fertile age. The condition for postmenopausal women is less noticed, but in general fewer taboos comes with old age, and when the bleeding and childbearing days are over women requires larger freedom and can cross gender boundaries (Lot Falck 1953:130; Morrow 2002:338; Andersson 2010:139, 172).

Robert Brightman (1993) has suggested that the great potency ascribed to blood and the antagonist between menstruating women and male hunting has a background in the experience of life as visibly reproduced by the flow of blood in the complementary forces of male and female reproduction. Women's ability to give birth and reproduce life is evidenced by blood which

in the event of conception are retained in their bodies. Life is also reproduced by killing animals, which paradigmatically is a male occupation involving sharp weapons causing the spill of blood, that is spear and bow (Brightman 1993:128-129). The idea of complementary forces of male hunting and female conception as means of reproduction is, of course, based on an ideal. Women's contribution to food supply by trapping and fishing are periodically of greater importance than meat from large game and, despite other equipment used could mean blood spilled. However, in the north elk and reindeer were crucial for the wellbeing of the community as their bodies provided not only the most valued food but also the materials for tools, winterclothing and shelter (Burch 1972:352, Hodgettes 2000). Further, hunting for the large animals was demanding in terms of skill, experience and physical endurance, but when succeeded it brought great satisfaction and delivery; materially, socially and emotionally. While trapping was available to all regardless of age or sex, the prestigious big game hunting was ideally an activity for men for which they had been prepared for since childhood, and a boy's first kill was a reason for celebration. As such, it was closely connected to masculine identity and maturity; it proved a man being able to marry (e.g. Bodenhorn 1990; Hoffman et al 2020; Lindqvist 2001a:113f; Brightman 1996:714; Tanner 2014:160; Morrow 2002:340; Jochelson 1920-26: 63). The counterpart to a girl's maturity was her first menses. Menarche was a powerful and potentially hazardous condition when the girl was subject to seclusion but also the point where her training for the vital responsibilities of adult womanhood began (e.g. Williams 2012; Hilger 1951; Libby 1952; Andersson 2010). This symbolic connection between hunting and conception linked by blood Brightman claims, explains the seeming paradox that young Cree girls at menarche "*are bears*". Bears among the Cree are the most spiritually powerful animals and the species to which the menstrual condition is most antagonistic, and speaking of the menstruating girl as a *bear* is saying that she is in a state where she is

full of power (Brightman 1993:129).<sup>2</sup> A fuller account of the same kind of inversion of otherwise antagonist phenomena in ritual comes from the San in Southern Africa.

For San hunters and gatherers, the Eland antelope was of immense symbolical importance. Besides providing the much-craved meat it was associated with good things such as fat and rain. When there still was eland around and people were allowed to hunt them freely, this highly praised animal was the ideal prey for a boy's first kill ceremony (Lewis Williams 1981; Guenther 1999:168). The eland was also at the centre of one of the most elaborate and important rituals performed; the girl's puberty rite which took place at her first menses. The performance of the ritual is subject to variation but in its basic content and form it is basically the same across San groups: the isolation of the girl when she is informed about her new duties by the elder women, the transition where she is in a liminal state, and finally her reintegration into the community (Guenther 1999:165). It is the state of transition which is of most interest here. During seclusion the girl learns about the danger she now is for men, their equipment and weapons and to their hunting. In the liminal state of the ritual however, social norms and categories are inverted; the girl is handling paradigmatically male objects used for curing and hunting and she is spoken of as simultaneously a hunter and an eland (aa; Lewis Williams 1981:51-52). Like Cree girls in the powerful condition of menstruation *are bears*, hunting, menarche, and the eland are symbolically linked in the girl's puberty rite - she is an eland, and *she is a hunter* (Power & Watts 1997 for discussion).

Against the background of symbolic bond and ritual antagonism between male hunting and female reproductive powers found among hunting communities, and the examples of the ritualized inversion of those powers during the liminal state of menarche, the fluid line between the legs of the spearbearer makes sense. This person is indeed a "hunter", but in a metaphorical sense; it is a girl in the powerful condi-

tion of her first menses carrying the most emblematic of male weapon – the spear. But what is her relation to the pregnant woman? One possibility is that the pair is not a pair at all but that the scene is revealing the event of the girls' transition from childhood to womanhood where pregnancy is the ideal condition of fulfilment. The row of footprints leading up to the young girl suggests this.

## The trail of life course

Animal and human tracks and footprints occur on many Stone Age rock art sites in northern Fennoscandia. They are especially common in Alta, Finnmark, northern Norway; Zalavrug by the White Sea, northern Russia and Kanozero where they often form long trails covering whole panels (Helskog 1999, 2012; Janik et al. 2007; Devlet et. al 2015). At Kanozero the most common trail is that of human- or bearlike footprints appearing on the rock without any sight of the wanderer. The person creating the trail is pictured on four occasions only of which three are found on the island of Kamennyi; the girl in the scene discussed, a phallic man on skis chasing a bear up and downhill until the bear is finally speared, and another phallic man on snowshoes (fig.5). All three are carrying spears which make them hunters, but the only prey visible is the bear whose trail is also pecked into the rock along with its pursuer (Kolpakov and Shumkin 2012:323; Gjerde 2010:328 fig. 226). The fourth example is a newly discovered image of an elk hunt from skis on the island of Elovij, this person too is equipped with what appears to be a spear, however this image is unclear (Kolpakov 2020).

To people living off animals, it is an absolute necessity to be attentive to the constant communication going on in the land. Animals (and people) reveal themselves and communicate by the spoor and tracks they leave behind, deliberately or involuntarily, such as broken branches and twigs, lairs, scents, droppings and footprints. However, some traces speak more clearly to the human senses and imagination. In the north,



Fig. 5a.

Illustration in Kolpakov & Shumkin 2012:323

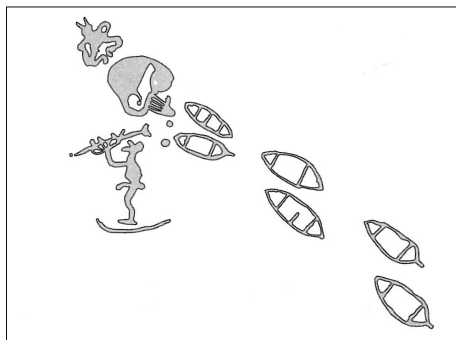


Fig.5b.

Illustration in Kolpakov & Shumkin 2012:324

Fig 5 (Fig 5a and 5b) Hunters equipped with spear and leaving tracks at Kanozero.

this is most evident when snow covers the ground and footprints appear as icons of presence and movement in the land. Among many northern hunting communities, animal and human footprints were subject to a row of notions and practices not to endanger hunting luck and venture the good relations to prey animals, such as for example not stepping or spilling their blood into their tracks (Brightman 1993:125; Tanner 2014:222; Eidlitz Kuoljok 199:95-96; Brandišauskas 2017:156; Vasilevich 1969:217; Jochelsson 1920-1926:77). It is not surprising that the trail often was a key metaphor (Johnson 2010:4, 67; Whitridge 2013; Ridington 1982). For example, to the Dunne-za, an Athapaskan group in Alberta and British Columbia, the apprehension of the world was centred around the trail. Every human and animal existed at a particular point on his or her trail which crossed and met with the trails of others. The individual trail led both ahead and behind and it could be followed in both directions in dreams (Ridington 1982; Devlet et al 2015 for Siberian examples). We do not know if the people who were making images in the rocks of lake Kanozero thought of trails in similar ways as the Dunne-za and other inland hunters, the most depicted hunting at Kanozero is the whale hunt where trails are of no relevance, but we do know that trails

were common and meaningful in the rock art where they incorporate time, movement and direction. The trail of footprints left by the girl suggests that she has arrived at the critical point in her lifecourse where her reproductive powers are released, evidenced by the flow of menstrual blood and that her social position is now changing. The scene then becomes not a "snapshot" of a man and a woman as a couple but reveals a transition of great importance, not just in the personal life of the young girl, but for the whole of the community.

### Metaphorical expressions of knowledge – concluding the discussion

One implication of the interpretation advocated here is that hunting the large animals ideally was an occupation for men, and that this form of hunting with the spear as the iconic weapon, was heavily symbolically laden. The ethnographies are clear that such a gendered division of labour do or did exist amongst nearly all hunter-gatherers, however it is not inflexible. Women can participate in hunting for the largest mammals (at least terrestrial), but with other tasks than men and more often for other species closer to camp and, with other weapons than their husbands, brothers and

fathers (Reyes Garcia et al 2020; Hoffman et al 2021; Ventakataraman et al. 2023; Martin et al 2024). Brightman dismisses any adaptive superiority of sexual division of labour in foraging societies which he means in fact would benefit from socializing women as big game hunters as well; the distinction, he claims, is primarily symbolic (1996:691, 693). Others have argued that socializing and training women as big game hunters would indeed be a risk for the community in the long term, especially in environments with low density of food such as the arctic and subarctic where hunting for large game means spending days away from camp often under harsh conditions (Marlowe 2005:56; Martin et al 2024).

There need not be a contradiction between symbolic and functional, evolutionary explanations of the persistent antagonism between men's hunting and women of fertile age. In nonmodernist, small scale societies dependant on local ecosystems, communication about and mediation between humans and their environment is embedded in intimate practical experience and engagement where narrative, iconography and metaphorical expression is actively negotiating the co-existence of human and non-human populations. Traditional knowledge, of course, does not deal with ecological issues only but with the social as well, which in hunting communities are closely intertwined and hardly can be separated. When socialised into the common body of knowledge, this communication does not convey information and facts as much as meanings which are more powerful and provide cues for and reinforce an appropriate habitus and way of life (Hornborg 2001, 2003). Importantly, while some actions and behaviour are transparent and understandable in relation to the purpose, others are not. Long term collectively earned insights kept alive across generations in stories and practices may be non-transparent but nevertheless implied in sets of rules, ethics and social norms (Hornborg 2001, 2003; Scott 2006, 2014; Pierotti 2011).

There are no doubt elements of degradation to be found among the various restrictions towards women and the mens hunting but more often than degradation, there exists a strong idea of mutual dependence between spouses and respect for the knowledge of the other (e.g. Lot-Falck 1953:167; Tanner 2014:154, Bodenhorn 1990). For example, among Inupiat Inuit the interdependence between men and women for survival is acknowledged and appreciated, and the division of labour is constructed as one in which both men and women have different but equally crucial tasks and ritual responsibilities (Bodenhorn 1990:65). The division of labour in Inupiat society does not differ much from other hunting groups in the arctic and subarctic areas, but the culturally acknowledged appreciation between spouses may vary. One meaning of the taboos, conducts of behaviour and restrictions towards women of fertile age and the male spheres of big game hunting then, could be to make explicit and transmit knowledge of the mutual dependence of men and women for the benefit of the community in the long run. Knowledge embedded in stories, metaphor and social norms is difficult to verify in the archaeological record, including rock art, and the question of adequacy remains an open one. However, rock art is reflecting the lives and bodies of humans and animals on a material level, sometimes in detail. For example, throughout the two oldest phases of Alta, phase I 5200-4200 BC and II 4200-3000 BC (Gjerdes chronology 2010), picturing animals as observed and encountered in the land was an intrinsic part of rock art imagery where the physiognomic characteristics, sex, behavior and social constellations by the seasons differed between species and changed over time. This includes their interaction with the human figures (Günther 2022). Simultaneously, much of what is going on in the sceneries and stories is not realistic, and imagery also communicate the extraordinary qualities of animals. Animals are central in the articulation and communication of social norms, ethics and intergenerational knowledge, which is why gender



Fig. 6. Another menstruation girl on the island of Kamennyi. Photograph in Kolpakov & Shumkin 2012:386.

issues would benefit from being addressed as closely intertwined with those.

North Fennoscandian rock art witness of a life closely intertwined with the large mammals in multiple ways and there are images which suggest an association between those and human reproduction and, life-courses (e.g. Gjerde 2010:422; Fuglestad and Goldhahn 2012; see Günther 2022:90-91 for detailed example). At Kanozero, human figures are more detailed than on most other sites, and there are those of presumably female sex but only one more which is likely to picture menstruation (Kamennyi 7 central part, Kolpakov & Šumkin 2012:386) (fig.6.). Possible examples of menstruation from other rock art sites are few and uncertain and it is perhaps understandable why menstruation has not been a criterion used for detecting sex in rock art images (e.g. Fuglestad and Goldhahn 2012; Fuglestad 2018). However, other biological physical markings of sex, especially female such as breasts and round bellies can be uncertain too, and the simple division of male or female, ignoring age, lifecourses or ambiguous gender categories is not satisfying (Gilchrist 2004; Fuglestad and Goldhahn 2012). If we are going to ask questions such as did women hunt for big game, we need to consider which women and when, since

gender segregations are more pronounced between puberty and menopause, and older women can cross gender boundaries. We also need to ask ourselves what we mean by *hunting* since hunting cannot be reduced to the pursuing and killing of the animal but involves a whole set of activities; ritual, symbolic and practical where the craft, work, behavior and even the thoughts of women in relation to the male hunters and the prey is vital for the outcome (e.g. Bodenhorn 1990). From this perspective, the girl pictured in the rock is more than a hunter in the metaphorical sense but is about to become a co-worker in the pursuit of the large mammals which are so vital, not just for survival but for living a good life in a northern environment.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> It has been suggested that the object is a paddle (Kashina and Chairkina 2017). This is less likely since there are no paddles pictured in the boats at Kanozero but there are spears in the hands of hunters.

<sup>2</sup> The association between bears and girls menstruating for the first time is not unique to the Cree (e.g. Hilger 1951:50).

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